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QUESTIONS FOR ALTERNATIVES

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work and lack of resources pushes them to the lowermost rungs of the ladder. These are the rungs that form a majority of the audience.

The greed of earning awards and honours inspires an ascent that makes stepping stones of other people. The rewards of competition and the fears of punishment in every conceivable sphere forces people to constantly mould and chisel themselves. After all, a person can ensure his/her place in the pyramid only by making the difference between self and the rest of humanity as great as possible - increasing the difference of hundreds to thousands, and those of thousands to millions. The measure of great or successful artist is the number of heads s/he has been able to climb over.

The inferior and the anti-human

Increasing sophistication in this process simply changes an increasing number of people into audience. They find themselves inferior in front of great artists. Feelings of inferiority discourage and demoralise. And what pleasure does the artist derive from all this anyway? The fundamentally anti-human pleasure of scrambling upwards over others!

The question for alternatives is not whether someone has reached up by talent, sincerity, hard work, and honesty or by dishonesty, manipulation, and stratagems. Instead, deliberations on the audience - artist dichotomy itself can be points of departure for alternatives.

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Introduction

What follow are pieces from our monthly Hindi language publication Faridabad Majdoor Samachar.

Given that accumulated labour (machines, knowledge, skills) has the capacity to make living labour productive/more productive, there is a position which advocates the elimination of human suffering and creation of a humane society through a qualitative leap in accumulated labour by breaking the bonds that hinder accumulation.

And given that for more than five thousand years now, accumulated labour has been antagonistic to living labour, there is another position that equates human suffering to accumulated labour as such.

Pragmatism appears and advocates putting breaks to accumulated labour while avoiding the questioning of the existing social relations.

It is in this scenario that questions for alternatives need to be posed.

Given that the reality that confronts us is both global and dynamic, the pieces here are necessarily fragmentary. Exchanging experiences and ideas of different facets in forms that keep the everyday totality within the reach of ordinary beings requires the active involvement of billions. Hence, the fragmentary nature is also an invitation to join in the discussions.

1. Questions for Alternatives

(March '99)

The present is extremely painful, it has become unbearable. We manage to live day to day, in a constant struggle for survival that is only buoyed up by the hope that the next generation may see better days. Even as the havoc spreads. Even as the present flounders.

How are we to live? For what kind of a future are we to strive, so that no future generation is forced to witness such a present.

Any worthwhile discussion on - and analysis of - questions for alternatives can take place only after we identify, and reject the pillars of the present, its bricks & mortar, its building blocks. It is in recognition of this reality that we are beginning a regular discussion here.

The Present : pillars, bricks, and mortar...

Let us begin by broadly identifying the elements that make up our "present."

Factories are the concrete symbols of the present. Ever accelerating speed, increasing workload, mounting insecurity and escalating fear are the fundamental elements of progress and development. The increasing pollution of water, air, and land are merely echoes of the spread of the factory system in every sphere of life.

The fortification of homes, offices, neighbourhoods, cities, and countries has progressed from grilled windows, doors, and fences, to gun-toting guards, to ever present surveillance cameras to cannons and tanks, to satellite-controlled missiles and nuclear weapons waiting to be triggered off to devastation. Even the sewage disposal and water supply necessities of big to bigger cities have increased to levels that demand extremely authoritarian regimes.

Broad and smooth roads, over bridges, flyovers, red-yellow-green lights, super thermal power houses, nuclear power plants, wires crisscrossing over thousands of miles, a number of aeroplanes landing and taking off every minute..... All require such specialisation that childhood is increasingly being squeezed, from class 1 to kindergarten to lower kindergarten to nursery to pre-nursery. With the development of computers, progress has reached such levels that in order to cope students resort to a choice between medication, drugs, or suicide.

Amidst the legacy of harshness and hierarchy in rural life,

questions like how much speed? What kind of speed? Speed for what?

8. Heights and their vertiginous attraction

(January 2000)

Eulogies of excellence. Creating aspirations to reach the top. Encouraging an upward ascent : higher, topmost, more peaks to conquer....All of this seems natural because it faithfully mirrors the ladder-like, pyramidal, hierarchical structure of our present. The present is, in fact, the supreme embodiment of such an arrangement.

Whereas, what seems for more natural are minor differences, wherein 'A' happens to be marginally better at something while 'B' is just a shade less or more capable at something else, and so on. These unimportant differences between persons and personalities lend themselves to a panorama of multi-faceted interactions; they form the basis for relations of 'not as unequals' amongst humanity.

Audience and Artists : Born of Pain

Hierarchical social systems engender meaningless, tedious, boring and harmful work, and too much of it. Consequently, a majority of humanity is forced into working. This takes place, as it is bound to, in an atmosphere of lies, deceit, misinformation, maneuvers, and force. There is no choice but to steal away from reality and dwell in an imaginary world, the world of entertainment where pathologies of adventure, excitement, or devotion are born. The audience/listener and the artist/performer is born.

Extremes of the ladder

Thus, begins the process of converting minor natural human differences into ladder-like gaps of the order of ten-hundred-thousand-lakh. The painful process of stretching and restricting, that must push or pull people into slots, continues. Most people are bound by the shackles of food, clothing, and shelter. Burden of

earth quake... Computer-controlled atomic plants

- Three to four crops in a year... tubewell, electricity, canal, dam... chemical fertilisers, insecticides, weedkillers

- Vehicles to move mountains of produce and human hordes... Wars for oil-oil-oil

- Each worker carrying out 20 bodily movements in 18 seconds on car manufacturing assembly lines

- Automation : one worker weaving cloth on 16 looms simultaneously

- Computer... Computer... Lines of workers with eyes on microscopes manufacturing computers... And workers who operate computers accounting for work done in each second

- Power press... forging hammer... chemical industry... plastic...

This is the schema within which speed is manufactured and processed. Faster speed implies a stricter control by human beings over their sense organs. A miniscule error leading to catastrophes, and the fear of the punishment apparatus, imposes harsher and harsher control over humans.

Severe control over one's sense organs does not lead to transcendence. It merely causes exhaustion to such an extent that the passive viewing of others playing-jumping-dancing-singing on the television becomes entertainment.

Urgent! At once! Immediately! Right now! Instantaneously! (...Faster, as soon as possible..) - Thus, the heavy-footed destructive omnipresent dance of speed. It demands perpetual alertness of body, mind, and soul. Accelerating speed exploits body, mind, psyche and soul to such an extent that increasing lack of desire, time, and energy widens the chasms among humans.

Keeping body and soul thus stretched, and the widening gulfs amongst human beings, are hardly worthy human aspirations. Accelerating speed and broadening chasms between humans being two sides of the same coin, it becomes necessary to discuss

progress is being made in cruelty.

All experience teaches us that the process of identifying these building blocks of the present, of peeling off their layers to grasp their essence, is incomplete without discussions on prototypes of alternatives. To banish the present, visions of alternatives - and accompanying discussions - are indispensable.

2. Factories : the dance of destruction

(April '99)

The essence of human endeavor in humankind's interest has been to reduce human burdens, to lessen the tensions of body and soul, to gain a sense of security, and an overall better life.

Factories, on the other hand, have emerged and expanded, guided by efforts aimed at increasing workloads at minimal costs, and getting work done at an accelerating pace. Therefore, factories are :

- Wage-workers imprisoned within delineated spaces : security guards at the gates and the police and military outside them.
- Drudgery under palpable fear of supervisors/managers/leaders/officers.
- Lungs incarcerated in dust-chambers, smoke-chambers, chemical chambers, among gases, fibres, powders, and microbes. Acids, electricity, furnaces.....burning, scorching, shocking human bodies. Cancer labs of magnetic, electric and atomic radiation.
- Centres of endlessly repetitive and tedious movements.
- Torture houses where work worth 1000 bucks has to be performed for 50 bucks amidst fear of losing this slavery.
- Places of such illumination that every night is awake with toil.
- Spaces where body and soul are distorted, where shift-

work disrupts the cycles of food and sleep.

- Non-living beings capable of infinite growth in size and numbers. Apparatuses of universal destruction polluting land-water-air, threatening existence.

3. Supervision-surveillance-regulation-control

(May '99)

Walls-barbed wires-gates-guards-time offices-sirens-clocks-tokens-card punching are the apparent markings of the encirclements. They embody merely the external control; allowing entry in and barring escape from factories.

Within the factory, control is efficiently organised into departments that monitor the prescribed quantity of production, the level of quality, speed, via concepts of discipline and disciplinary actions, incentives, increments, promotions.

Supervision, surveillance, control, and regulation are not the lot of factories alone. These operate and are dominant in every sphere of social life : give a report, finish the course, enter a file, sign a register, suffer audit and investigation... Where are these not present?

Ever tightening coils of control - and the means of such control-are inherent in the present. And these means are becoming and are being made more sharp-edged, more widespread as this present becomes more hollow and less capable of standing on its own. Workers harnessed to tasks that require them to operate outside walled enclosures, beyond the sights of supervisors, are still bound to the enclosures by chains of pagers and cell-phones.

The powers of human sight being limited, and the reliability of suspicious eyes not enough, cameras and close-circuit TVs are being arranged at different places for round-the-clock surveillance and detection.

The web of computers and satellites spanned out for moment to moment monitoring of every nook and corner is being made more intricate and sophisticated.

- Inventing medicines and medical practices so that work is not hindered by the ill effects of increasing speed and load of work.

And, such similar misanthropic, anti-nature tasks to maintain the present.

In spite of knowledge being put to such uses, why does this infatuation with it persist? Why the passion for knowledge? Knowledge acquired and produced by us is worsening our lives. If we want a life in which nights are meant for sleeping, where calculations of seconds and minutes do not drive us, where the ambience is not that of one-upmanship, then it is necessary to discuss the questions of knowledge, what kind of knowledge, how much knowledge?

7. Accelerating speed, widening chasms

(December '99)

Speed, faster speed, still more speed has compressed the world. Accelerating speed has condensed the earth to the size of a village. It is said that speed has brought the world into human grip. But the chasms between human beings are ever-widening. How does one explain this paradox?

- 500-1000 to be fed in half an hour : a balancing act between a dozen tasks simultaneously carried out by those making the food, those serving it, and those eating it

- As the lights turn red, drivers decelerate from a speed of 60 to 0 in a flash, pedestrians cross over within seconds

- Hundreds getting off a train and hundreds embarking in a span of a minute or half a minute

- Class one-upper KG-lower KG-nursery-pre-nursery... annual exams-bi-annual exams-quarterly exams-monthly exams-weekly class tests... daily home-work... tuitions

- High-tension electric lines... Workers carving and ferrying coal miles in the womb of the earth.... Huge dams that make the

But the "I" itself is being battered and bruised. There are hordes queuing up to consult psychiatrists, and to meet saints, mahatmas, mediums, spiritualists, priests... For bringing the "I" closer to its body, an end to the antagonistic relations between dead labour and living labour is indispensable. For alternatives, it is necessary to think about those forms of accumulated labour with which living labour can exist in amity.

6. At night - it is dark no more

(November '99)

Tamso ma jyotirgamaya - let the light of knowledge drive away the darkness - is the mantra. From our childhood the worship of knowledge has thus been inculcated in us. "Knowledge is enlightenment." It has always been presented to us as anti-darkness, veritable light. We are made to sing eulogies to scholars, to the wise and the learned. We are taught that to attain eminence and excellence it is necessary to be learned; specifically, to be more learned than our peers.

The bonds-chains-shackles of discipline thus became indispensable. With these came the craving and obsession to outdo others. Competition and rivalry became a part of our temperament.

Soon it became obvious that specialisation in knowledge is a necessity for getting a job. And, a look at the 'good' and desirable jobs made obvious the tasks that the knowledgeable are engaged in :

- Research on armaments and on strategies for war.
- Research on modes to keep humans in check for the maintenance of hierarchy.
- Investigation into the ways and means of increasing the amounts and speeds of work.
- To invent such tools-implements-machines that human beings can be yoked to more and more work, and the earth can be increasingly plundered.

Now and then the cry goes up that there is a lack of adequate supervision, surveillance, control, regulation, and it is because of this that problems abound. More strictness is declared to be the panacea. Whereas it is in the very presence of control that the problem lies. The concomitant expansion and sharpening of control is merely proof of the misanthropic nature of the present.

Attempts to eliminate supervision - surveillance - control - regulation are necessary points of departure for any alternatives.

4. Faster and faster - towards doom

(June '99)

Speed, of course, is one of the fundamental canons of the present but it is also one of its soft spots. 'Fast to faster' as the mantra for better life is losing its sheen, but lamentations about the necessity of speed for human survival - its sheer indispensability - are increasing.

While at workplaces the mirage of endless acceleration has engendered endless insecurity of life and of earning a living, on roads, speed has created such killing fields that loss of limb and life is an ever present reality.

The limit is long past when the champions of discipline could mould bodies to match the required speeds. Even the use of medicines to drive bodies has reached a saturation point. Now scientists are blindly immersed in research that is geared to the very transformation of bodies, such that they could conform to the speed of computers, computerised machines, and electronics.

Fast to faster speeds, by engendering obsessions of immediate gratification and extreme pleasures in life, are putting life itself at stake.

The race for speed, more speed, and still more speed has, of course, given birth to those lethal pits of dust, smoke, gases, fibres, powders, microbes, chemicals, acids, electricity, heat, electromagnetic and atomic radiation, that are called factories. It

is also propelling the whole world to a factory-like state, posing danger to life on earth itself.

The question of putting reins to this speed-acceleration-pace is, of course, important, but much more necessary is the task of thinking about its alternatives.

5. Cleaving apart "me" and my body : transformed into things/commodities

(July '99)

Differences can be said to be superficial. Underneath the surface each person's "I" lies battered. This is the present. And we could only have come to this as the result of a process. A few sprouts of antagonism between "I" and "We" emerged five - six thousand years ago. Like a poisonous tree they spread between individual and society. The spread of antagonism between living labour and accumulated/dead labour has brought humanity to such a present. Accumulated/dead labour, dressed up as the property of companies and institutions, taking the whole of earth in its stranglehold : this is the present.

Work - work- work

The meaning of the antagonism between dead labour (machines, knowledge, etc.) and living labour (people doing work) is : work, more work, and yet more work. And today this is at its zenith.

Your work could be to paste a perpetual smile in a reception room or to plough a piece of farmland, row after relentless row. Your work could be the projection of ceaseless charm or it could be operating computer-controlled machines day in and day out. Competing incessantly to be a champion or being harnessed everyday in the laboratory to invent a new each day; weaving cloth in every shift or repeating lessons in the class year after year; treating broken, lacerated, ill bodies or keeping shop with endless haggling over prices...

Work-work-work and the gnawing anxiety that work may cease! This is the present. It can be said that each body has become a commodity today. We all have become items to be sold and bought in the market. The price of each is assessed. Our price is determined by what we do, what we are deemed capable of. In this context, the difference between wage-workers and managers is merely that of the amount.

This body : useful cog/not so useful cog

"Up to what capacity can this cog be used?" - This is the yardstick of looking at each other's bodies, this is the measuring rod of the present. The perpetual process of cutting-polishing-moulding bodies towards higher utility as cogs has made life miserable for children, young men and women, and the elderly. Obviously, in such a present, interpersonal relations are extremely painful. But to come to grips with this infinite pain, it is necessary to consider "How do we look at our own bodies?"

Drive yourself : harder, still harder...

Under the compulsions of the present - where each body's price must increase, each body must stay workable - the body is divorced from its "I". To torment its own body and mind has become the daily routine of each & every "I". Each "I" is seen to be ordering its own body to strain the limbs and stress the mind. If tea, coffee, or alcohol cannot do the job, take drugs! Don't fall sick if possible, but if you do, then take medicines that will make you fit for work in a jiffy - "rub iodex and get to work." The body, subjected to these therapeutic assaults, becomes increasingly vulnerable. Dye hair for eternal youth, get plastic surgery to remove wrinkles, take tonics, use drugs. Work!

Medical insurance has allotted so much compensation for the loss of two fingers and so much for the loss of one eye. And what if you die of over-work? Don't worry, you will get compensation...

The "I" appears to stand apart and issue commands to the body.